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ABSTRACT

California State University, Chico, and 47 rural school districts in northeastern California collaborate on an on-the-job teacher preparation program designed to alleviate the shortage of qualified special education teachers and reduce teacher isolation. The university provides televised or Web-based courses, regional supervision, and separate course sections for interns. Public schools guarantee 10 paid release days annually to attend classes. Tuition stipends, mentors, and evaluation are supported through state and federal grants. This program's unique features include inter-institutional processes, cohort formation, accessible and relevant information, electronic network connection, and intern teacher support. Evaluation findings indicate a significant increase in graduates' ability to teach and work with pupils, parents, and other teachers. Graduate retention rates exceed state and national levels for rural special educators. A major challenge identified was challenging working conditions--special education teachers, particularly in rural settings, deal with pupils who have severe learning and emotional difficulties in mainstreamed settings that do not always meet pupil needs. Perhaps the most significant lesson learned in the rural partnership was the importance of building and maintaining personal relationships across the vast region. Building such relationships takes time but is key to a successful partnership. Funding sources, legislators, and participants need to recognize that it takes 3-5 years for such a collaborative partnership to show results. (TD)

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FINDING AND KEEPING THE BEST: A RURAL REGIONAL PARTNERSHIP

Perspective And Framework

"Finding and Keeping the Best," an on-the-job teacher preparation program, is designed and administered by a partnership of California State University, Chico (CSU, Chico) and 47 school districts in 14 Northeastern California counties spanning 40,000 square miles. In this model, collaborative structure was originally defined as the sharing of responsibility and fiscal and personal resources in order to recruit, select, educate, support, and certify the professional special education teacher. The collaboration within this rural partnership program is an outgrowth of the university's long-standing and active Special Education Advisory Board, a group representing each county office and major school district, and including a cross-section of professional roles, community and parent representatives, and university faculty. Several years ago, after examining the personnel needs of the region and multiple alternatives proposed by the university, the Board approved the design of a two-year training program for special education interns. At the same time, members formed a regional partnership to improve the quality of education in the region, to alleviate its severe shortage of qualified special educators, and to reduce teachers' professional isolation.

The resulting collaborative inter-institutional structure requires each of the partners to make fiscal contributions to the program. The university provides televised or web-based courses, regional supervision, and separate course sections for interns. The public schools guarantee interns ten paid release days annually to attend classes. Partial tuition stipends, mentors' or support providers' services, and program coordination and evaluation are supported through grants from the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing and the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) and the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP).

In any long-term collaboration, the energy and spirit of equity that initiated the venture must be sustained. The Advisory Board meets at least semi-annually to maintain oversight of the project. In addition, a continuous pattern of communication ensures that the university and each of the 47 Local Education Agencies share equally in decisions governing each individual intern's recruitment, selection, support and competency verification. Research in school improvement, teacher preparation, and staff development commonly points to the importance of such collaboration: the greater the degree of cohesion and collaborative structures, the greater the possibilities for school improvement and excellence in teacher education (Tharp, Estrada, Dalton, & Yamauchi, 2000). A participating public school administrator testifies to the replicability of this program: "If it can work here, it can work anywhere."

Program Features

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This partnership program for the preparation of special education teachers is distinct from traditional programs in the following five ways:

1. Inter-institutional processes: The university and employing school district work across historical organizational boundaries, sharing equally in decisions governing each intern's recruitment, admission, support, and certification.

2. Cohort formation: Program activities include both informal socialization time and structured interactions designed to facilitate group cohesion and support. In late summer, prior to beginning their new jobs, interns attend pre-service survival training that addresses their immediate needs. The pre-service session, fondly termed "Boot Camp," includes formal instruction in Special Education "Survival Pedagogy" such as: Individual Educational Programs (IEPs), roles of the special education specialist, daily schedules, introductory classroom and behavioral management, key elements of laws governing special education, and collaboration with professionals and parents. A critical aspect of the pre-service experience is the formation of a supportive intern cadre or cohort. Interns begin to form the professional peer relationships that will sustain their energies through their intensive program.

3. Accessible and relevant information: The schedule and structure of the partnership program is also unique. Learning experiences are individually tailored, accessible, and highly relevant to interns' classroom contexts. Following their pre-service experience, interns enroll in a two-year program. Special education faculty teach interns in remote, rural sites through weekly evening courses offered on the university's interactive online web-based distance education system. Faculty also meet with the intern cadre for a full-day class each month. The current needs of interns in their schools determine the sequence of course material. Since new interns need and want to know everything at once, university faculty find they must be constantly ready to address an unpredictable variety of issues, ranging from behavioral management to collaboration and diagnosis and instruction. Theory and research are rapidly translated to practice.

Throughout the partnership program, the scope of academic content and the expectations for competency attainment are maintained at the same level of quality as found in the university's traditional special education programs. A longitudinal study comparing graduates of the partnership and graduates of the traditional program verified the equivalent high quality of both programs in producing effective teachers. (Churchill & Jensen, 1999).

4. Electronic network connection: provides regional outreach and improves communications by linking intern teachers with other cohort teachers, university course instructors, field supervisors, local support providers (teachers and administrators), and university staff (Credential's Office and project managers).

5. Intern teacher support is specifically designed to increase teacher competence and confidence and reduce professional isolation. The regional partners, consisting of university faculty, school administrators, and trained mentor teachers, form a "safety net" around each intern teacher. Influenced by Tharp and Gallimore's (1991) "Triadic Model of Assisted Performance," mentors routinely interact with university faculty and co-participate in reflective activities with interns.

Program partners are acutely aware of the challenges facing special education intern teachers: they are learners (similar to student teachers) on the job, yet they simultaneously perform as teachers (beginning teachers), whose learning may be perceived as secondary to their work within their local school sites. District and university staff provide joint support and supervision beginning during pre-service and extending throughout the two-year program. A local, fully credentialed special education teacher is selected by the public schools and trained by the university to function as a mentor or support provider to each trainee. Influenced by the framework found in Tharp and Gallimore's (1991) "Triadic Model of Assisted Performance," the university and local school district administrator help the mentor teacher to assist the intern effectively.

In a recent program improvement, three regional mentor leaders have been selected as Distinguished Teachers in Residence from the local schools. They serve each region of the partnership by facilitating the support network in each separate county, conducting regional focus groups, directly assisting interns in their classrooms, and collaborating with administrators and mentors. It is believed that in this model, each intern will receive increased personal and professional support, and that consistency across the region will be improved.

There is a strong theoretical base for this augmentation. The research of McIntyre and Hagger (1996) suggests that both support and rigor are required if the mentoring process is to promote professional development. Their findings are based on data from six research teams at Oxford University, Manchester, Metropolitan University, Keele, Sussex, Swansea and Leicester Universities. Field's (1994) discussion of the teacher-mentor also emphasizes that mentoring should go beyond support to facilitate professional growth: "There is a distinction," he states (p. 67), "between social support that puts newcomers at ease and professional support that advances knowledge and practice." Our interns clearly need both forms of support.

Program Evaluation Findings:

Longitudinal analyses from our extensive Special Education Graduate Outcomes Study conducted 1994 through 2000 indicated a pattern of program improvement attributable to the evolving collaborative partnership structure. Perceptions of the competency of graduates of the partnership's preparation program were compared to perceptions of the competency of graduates of the traditional teacher preparation programs. Measures included graduates' self-reports, employers' ratings, and university supervisors' ratings. Because data were collected from graduates, their school site administrators, and their former field supervisors, the merit of the partnership program structure could be assessed from the multiple perspectives of stakeholders and program consumers. Analysis between each consecutive year of program implementation indicated a significant increase in graduates' ability to teach and work with pupils, parents, and other teachers. Graduates of the partnership program identified as major program benefits: Relations with peers; Acquisition of knowledge; Sense of professionalism; Accessibility to professional certification; Program's structural elements and accessibility.

School Administrators reported that the partnership program, in contrast to a traditional program: Improved the quality of educators for their local classrooms; Provided a structure that reduced the personal, professional, and geographical hardships of obtaining certification; Established a support structure that both assists beginning teachers and encouraged the retention of experienced teachers; Improved educational services to students, their schools, and their families; Fostered a desire for continuous professional growth for program participants; Identified alternative program graduates as leaders and mentors in their schools, who bring current information and resources to the local educational programs; and Improved "connections" between the public schools and the university.

The cycle of curriculum development, instructional planning, delivery of field supervision, and corresponding evaluation activities is continuous. Evaluation findings indicate that redesigned preparation curriculum ***improves*** the rural special education profession. Program course content is now aligned to the new California State Education Specialist Program Standards that address the direct services (i.e.: instruction, classroom management, curriculum modifications, assessment) as well as indirect services (i.e.: collaboration/consultation with general education teachers and related agencies, IEP case management and scheduling) performed by special educators.

Evaluation data have also revealed a major partnership challenge: The issue of *"challenging working conditions"* is one not easily solved in the region. The project has had some influence on working conditions for interns through the newly revised Individualized Induction Plan (IIP) that spells out responsibilities for each intern and through contractual agreements against assignment overloads. Nonetheless, special education interns frequently face classroom assignments that would challenge veteran educators. We believe that the reality of the special education profession, perhaps particularly in remote rural settings, is that teachers deal each day with pupils who have very severe learning and emotional difficulties and mainstreaming settings that do not always meet pupil needs. Our public school partners find it difficult and often impossible to predict the intensity of classroom assignments since their schools must serve each child who enters special education. Public school programs for the Emotionally Disturbed (ED) experience the most severe turnover in both intern and credentialed teacher employment within the rural region. Our project will continue to work with administrators, to hire instructors/regional support mentors especially skilled in the ED populations, and to conduct a formal review of the situation through the partnership represented by the Special Education Advisory Board.

Evaluation data indicates a major partnership program success. Graduate retention rates exceed state and national levels for rural special educators. Ten years after the initiation of the Partnership, 95% of program graduates are currently employed by local school districts that participated in and contributed to the partnership.

This clear pattern of graduate retention not only reduces the shortage of fully qualified educators in the region, but also demonstrates to each of the partners the cost-effectiveness of investing resources in the education and development of its future teachers.

Significant Lessons Learned

In a recent chapter submitted by Michael D. McKibbin for the 2001 Association of Teacher Educator's (ATE) Yearbook on Alternative Certification, authors Churchill and Jensen (in press) shared a significant lesson learned from "growing" a regional partnership for rural special education. In their section that describes the Northeastern California Partnership for Special Education is a quotation from Rob Lehman, President Emeritus of the Fetzer Institute (1998):

> "Collaboration, on the surface, is about bringing together resources, both financial and intellectual, to work toward a common purpose. But true collaboration has an 'inside,' a deeper, more radical meaning. The inner life of collaboration is about states of mind and spirit that are open - open to self-examination, open to growth, open to trust, and open to mutual action. Collaborative relationships that arise from such radical openness become vehicles of co-creation. And human collaboration that draws upon the resources of mind and money, but not on the resources of grace, will only rearrange the furniture."

Churchill and Jensen (in press) concluded that perhaps the most significant lesson learned in the rural partnership was the importance of building and maintaining personal "relationships" over time across the vast region. They believe that these relationships provide the key to a successful partnership program. The authors state," This collaborative partnership process is extremely time consuming and neither *immediately* gratifying nor time or cost-effective; our longitudinal program evaluation data indicate that important program benefits are realized only over time. Specific lessons learned include: the importance of our daily activities and interactions that will have long term effects; the need for continuous, open, bi-directional communications with all partners, both verbally and also in the written form; and the need for patience and understanding from external funding sources and legislators, recognizing that it will take 3 to 5 years before a collaborative partnership alternative certification program will result in long-term professional changes for teachers."

In sum, *Finding and Keeping the Best, A Rural Regional Partnership* is not only viewed as an immediate response to the shortage of special education teachers, but also as a systemic means to reduce the professional isolation of special educators and to improve the special education teaching profession in our rural region. As stated by Churchill and Jensen (in press)," The Partnership began with a vision for individual and professional changes that could only be accomplished by sharing resources of mind and money. It is only over time and drawing also upon the "resources of grace," that we have begun to realize this vision."

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